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Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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Column Editors' Note: *This column for Against the Grain is devoted to discussing issues affecting library acquisitions, library vendors and the services and products they supply to academic libraries, and the publishing marketplace as a whole. It is an ongoing conversation between a book vendor representative, Robin Champieux, and an academic librarian, Steven Carrico. — RC and SC*

Steve: It was good seeing you at the **Charleston Conference** as it celebrated its 30th year. I can remember when the conference was still small enough to be held in the basement of the **Lightsey Center**. Even then it was my favorite library conference. This year's conference was really good, yet again, but the overlying theme might easily have been renamed, "All About Patron Driven Acquisitions." Lots of discussion about PDAs and how they're influencing the library world: from their impact on budgets to traditional collection development to the publishing industry itself. It was all the buzz.

Robin: There definitely was a lot of programming devoted to demand-driven acquisitions and its impact on various spheres. I think the topic's prominence reflects a few trends and developments: the funding crises many institutions are trying to manage and some through more non-traditional workflows, like DDA; the increasing use and experience with such non-traditional workflows; and a growing acknowledgement from vendors and publishers that they must find viable strategies for responding to these rapid changes and new needs. So, while DDA may have been the star of the conference, what I find most interesting and telling is drilling into and exploring why libraries are now so much more interested in using these kind of tools. There was lots of good discussion in this vein both in the sessions and at the dinner table.

Steve: You say Demand Driven (DDA), I say Patron Driven (PDA); you say tomato (tə māt'ō), I say tomato (tə māt'ō), etc. — let's call the whole thing off. Instead, why not revisit our "what if in the future" topic from last time? More specifically "what if in the future the library is not the broker and buyer of scholarly materials?" I took the position that the publishers wouldn't go full bore into selling their content directly to the end users and squeezing out the libraries. In my opinion it would not only be a logistical mess to sell individual journals to thousands of users and/or small journal packages to hundreds of departments and colleges, but the cost-effectiveness of this model doesn't seem obvious. Many publishers, especially the Big Deal publishers, don't really want to sell their content in large journal packages and discourage libraries from

"cherry picking" individual titles (especially the titles with high use) by pricing these cherries extremely high. The packages are where the real revenue stream is, and I cannot see a college, department, or research center attempting to purchase and manage a package deal. Well, not anytime soon. So I believe academic libraries will go on being "access brokers" for quite some time. Your thoughts?

Robin: I think you are right, for some publishers and resources, selling directly to students and faculty would be unsustainable. But, as **Rick Anderson** argues, there are resources for which a direct-to-reader model is more viable and manageable, such as journals with relatively low site license fees.¹ Also, you are ignoring a very important incentive: publishers rely on the library market; if they can no longer do so or not without accepting steep revenue declines, then seeking out new markets and business models could be seen as a necessity.

Steve: OK, let's just say the library of the future no longer was the content broker and buyer of scholarly materials for the academic community. You then asked, "what kinds of services and value is it delivering?" Hmm, what if I were to venture that it's not completely unrealistic to envision Open Access initiatives forcing libraries and publishers into a competitive arena, essentially creating a whole new paradigm wherein libraries either host scholarly content or help pay for the hosting of scholarly content for their own faculty, universities, and research centers. The long-standing academic publishing model as we know would erode away. Potentially that'd shake up or destroy a significant portion of the library market, wouldn't it?

Robin: I think we need to save a detailed discussion of Open Access for a future column, but you make a good point and identify another factor influencing the relationships between and in between libraries, publishers, and users. I also think it's important that we don't see these possible futures as mutually exclusive. For instance, will the growth of OCA initiatives and locally-hosted repositories replace publisher online journals and resources, or will both access points be important and expected? If it is both, as I think it may be, is the library providing access to both, or are users buying the publisher access directly?

Steve: Aha, an excellent set of questions, and the ball is back in my court. But you're right, let's save the Open Access topic for another time. Rather, let's say the academic publishing model is not going to blow up entirely any time soon; then the question "what kinds of services and value are the library delivering?" really gets tough. Particularly if we are led to believe that such library activities as selecting

books and materials, bibliographic instruction, cataloging, or manning the reference desk are going the way of the card catalog. Let's see, if librarians of the future aren't engaged in those activities, what's left? Study hall monitors? Boy, that's a bright future! Personally I believe that at least in the foreseeable future libraries will remain content brokers and that librarians will be doing various types of collection development and selecting (perhaps focusing on specialized areas and collection strengths); will be doing cataloging (but again very specialized); and will be doing reference and instruction, although probably focusing more on virtual interaction and distance learning. The value the librarians will continue to bring to users is an expertise in all areas of information discovery. How do you see it?

Robin: For me, what's most important to acknowledge is that we — libraries, librarians, users, vendors, and publishers — are in the midst of dramatic changes. There are new technologies, new expectations and needs, new business models, and new economics that are pushing and pulling us into new roles and relationships. You may be right — librarians and libraries of the near future may be doing collection development, reference, and instruction, but how and where is, I think, going to change significantly. I also believe that librarians and libraries can and should influence these new modes, roles, and relationships.

Steve: You're so right about change — we've seen a lot of it in libraries and publishing, and there is more to come. If what you say about librarians' having real influence on future trends is true, then their challenge is even more daunting, but maybe also the picture is more optimistic.

Robin: Yes! I do believe we can be optimistic, but that comes with being engaged, realistic, and creative, skills and qualities, thankfully, that are not unfamiliar to information professionals. I also think we — and, again, I mean libraries, publishers, vendors — need to critically examine our existing assumptions and practices. Digging our heels into the status quo won't provide long-term success; rather, we need to be imagining and preparing for our future relevancies. That was the important conclusion I found in **Rick's** article and why I asked you about the roles and services libraries and librarians will be providing in the future.

Steve: Well said. You may now step down from the podium, **Professor Champieux**. You know, it's hard to argue with someone so positive. This is supposed to be a vendor-librarian showdown! Oh well, there's always next time. Enjoy the holidays!

Robin: You too **Steve**. Happy holidays! 🐼

endnote on page 73

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — How Goes the Book Approval Plan in the Days of the eBook?

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While the academic library where I am is in the thick of the eBook revolution and approaching patron-driven acquisitions, we have not yet abandoned traditional book selection via the time-tested book approval plan, although at times it seems like it is abandoning us. For the library selectors who still have the responsibility to build a print collection in their subject areas, the approval plan is a very useful tool.

The recent demise of a free-standing **Blackwell**, through its incorporation into **YBP**, leaves it and **Coutts** as the only complete academic approval plans in the country. There are still some smaller plans, but nothing absolutely suitable to large research libraries. So there are a lot of folks out there redoing profiles, reworking their workflows into those of new vendors, and working out a lot of technical details. Redoing profiles quickly is like translating a lot of complicated books, including poetry, from one language to another. It is bound to result in a lot of miscommunication.

When companies grow rapidly through the acquisition of other companies, or by the demise of competitors, or just by a growing market, it always results in Herculean efforts for any of them to keep pace with all those new customers. New staff may be hired quickly in anticipation, or soon afterwards, but it has always been my experience that new employees in this kind of work encounter a pretty significant learning curve. Sometimes companies cut corners by trying to do more with the same.

I worked for a subscription vendor many years ago, back in the days when print journals were the only medium for journals. The vendor hit at a time when business went through the roof. Libraries were still being built, money for higher education and library funding was growing, and STM publishing was growing too — as were the prices, I might say. The company hired me after they realized they had grown too big too fast, and the customers were complaining, some with their feet.

The work was divided geographically, and my area had been a sort of stepchild. I was given stacks of correspondence to answer, which required solving a lot of subscription

problems — and I was new on the job. I spent some months working out complicated order, receipt, and invoicing problems with an in-house computer system we had, very cutting edge at the time, but nothing like what there is now with Web-based systems.

The work I did required a lot of interaction with other company employees, publishers, and of course, customers. The customer work was basically correspondence, since I worked for an international vendor, and my customers were overseas. Very little telephoning was done to customers. It was actually more important that I be where the publishers were and could telephone them. We also occasionally used an old-fashioned machine called a **Teletype**, which produced a long tape, as a record something had been sent. The first year I worked there I thought I must be doing a terrible job, since it took a long time to turn customers around, and I was just learning my way around. I would get lost in the building, and it took awhile to build up good working relationships with all the staff. Actually I was doing a good job, and very few customers left the fold after I came on board. Enough of this reminiscing. Back to approval plans.

Even those with standing plans with vendors are always working out wrinkles, but vendor time must be more limited when there is such an influx of new customers. This process combined with the rise of patron-driven acquisitions and eBook acquisitions as they are rocketing makes for very busy acquisitions librarians as well. It is all supposed to be getting easier and needing fewer people to get things done, but not yet where I am.

In a traditional approval plan, one is dealing with physical objects, and most of the elements of the process remain the same as they were at the beginning of all approval plans. Only now, in our case and many others, there is a lot more than just books. For us, **PromptCat** Marc records precede the arrival of the approval books. They all come preprocessed and ready to hit the approval shelves and shortly thereafter the library shelves with a check of the invoice and minor copy cataloging procedures. These, coupled with some **Edifact** ordering for firm orders, make for a lot of work on both sides, and a lot of time to get things right. It takes a lot of time and effort on both sides to get these services and the procedures changed to accommodate the new vendor's operation.

I know a lot of large libraries have given up on book approval plans, some unwillingly due to financial constraints, others because book buying has shrunk so much in a turn almost completely to digital material, that the activity is no longer viable. In a lot of libraries, however, such as ours, a book approval plan is part of the mix of acquisition of materials of all kinds. There


are some subject areas which will be the slowest to march off into eBookland. Art History and Modern Languages and Literatures, areas for which I select, are two of these.

Other areas where a lot of books are still bought are History and the Social Sciences. We still have a pretty comprehensive approval plan, both in books and slips.

Niche vendors who provide approval plans, such as those that supply exhibition catalogs for art libraries and foreign vendors which provide language specific books, along with music, and perhaps some other specialty areas I'm forgetting, may continue supplying academic libraries with books through approval plans. Art history books may be the last to go. The reproduction of images in books are still superior to what can be digitized, and perhaps as important is the fact that a lot of the rights to the images are difficult to trace, and that has to be done for them to be digitized and available.

The approval plan arose during the **Richard Abel** era when libraries were building large comprehensive library collections to support teaching and research in all disciplines. There were no digital resources, and most areas were still very book- and print serial-dependent. When approval plans started up, during that era of "forklift librarianship," they were considered quite revolutionary and were disdained by many who were given over to collection building through individual book selection and acquisition. However, it was very time- and work-intensive and slow as well. This was the selection entirely book-by-book based quite a lot on book reviews, some of which did not appear much later than the book. *The New York Times Book Review* was a main tool of selection, as were the listings in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. These sources are still heavily used, but they still are labor intensive. Approval plans often track these sources and they can be built into a plan. Personally, I still use book reviews for my area of Art History. I catch important titles that seem to appear nowhere but there.

One area where a book approval plan still seems to win out in acquiring hardcover books rather than wait for the eBook has to do with the rapidity of publication in that medium. Some eBooks simply don't come out immediately, and being current in many fields, including History is still important.

The eBook revolution will be nearly a total victory come too soon. I am not smart enough to know how soon that will be. Until then a well-functioning book approval plan continues as an excellent selection and acquisition tool, and one that accomplishes the job with great efficiency, especially when coupled with books cataloged with **PromptCat** and then preprocessed. 

Library Perspective, Vendor Response from page 72

Endnote

1. **Anderson, Rick.** *EDUCAUSE Review* 45 (4) (July/August 2010): 10-11, <http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume45/Ifl-WereaScholarlyPublisher/209335> (accessed November 21, 2010).